

# Seattle Office for Civil Rights

## Community Report 2006 - 2008



*Equal rights and social justice for all*

# A Message from the Director



In the Fall of 1963, after years of struggle and mass protests, the Seattle City Council passed the city's first Open Housing Ordinance. But there was a catch: for the measure to become law, Seattle voters

would have to ratify the ordinance in a city-wide referendum the following Spring. On March 10, 1964, the tally was not close: Seattle voters turned down the Open Housing Ordinance 115,627 to 54,448 – a margin of more than two to one.

Forty-five years later, it can be hard to imagine that we live in the same city as the one that chose to keep segregating people based on their skin color. Seattle is one of the most creative, beautiful and dynamic places in the United States. We're proud to be a city that embraces people's differences, a leader in environmentalism, the arts, human rights and other important causes.

And yet the markers of that "other" city are everywhere to see, if only we choose to look. Seattle has worked for years to eliminate overt racist policies and practices in housing, employment and public institutions – yet people of color in our community continue to be impacted by systemic race-based biases in housing, employment, health care and other areas. In other realms too, Seattle's reality does not entirely reflect its self-image. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed in 1990, yet people with disabilities still struggle to achieve their rightful accommodations under the law. People who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered experience systemic discrimination in employment benefits, protection for their families, and property ownership.

The mission of the Seattle Office for Civil Rights is two-fold: to help individuals by enforcing anti-discrimination laws, and to fight for race and social justice within City government and across our community. In other words, to use the system to remedy injustice, and to change the system to create justice.

This Report to the Community highlights our work from 2006-2008. It also looks forward to our efforts in 2009-2010 to challenge institutional racism by forging community partnerships through the Seattle Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI).

In 2007 I was honored to be appointed the new director of the Seattle Office for Civil Rights. I first joined SOCR in 2005, and was immediately struck by my co-workers' dedication and commitment. In the years since, my admiration and respect for the staff of SOCR has only increased. No brief summary such as this report can do justice to the day-to-day work of our department – the thousands of phone calls answered and customers assisted. When I look back at the last two years, I am proud of how much the SOCR team has accomplished, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to work with such a fine team of professionals.

If you have questions about anything you read here, please contact our office for more information, or visit us at [www.seattle.gov/civilrights](http://www.seattle.gov/civilrights). You can learn more about RSJI at [www.seattle.gov/rsji](http://www.seattle.gov/rsji).

Julie Nelson,  
Director of the Seattle Office for Civil Rights



# Enforcement

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights enforces the City's anti-discrimination laws in housing, employment, public accommodations and contracting. When someone files a charge of illegal discrimination with SOCR, we conduct an investigation and issue a finding based on the evidence. Whenever possible, we work to negotiate a settlement that is beneficial for all parties.

## Cases and Stories 2006 - 2008

Every discrimination case tells a story. Some stories reflect prejudicial experiences that are as old as our country; others illustrate the leading edge of our growth as a multicultural community.

**About 25% of charges filed annually with SOCR lead to some sort of settlement.** Details of settlements (including cash payments) are based on circumstances specific to individual cases. Here is a sampling of people's life experiences that have passed through the hands of our investigators:

**Race:** A man contacted SOCR after the resident manager of his apartment building made racially insulting comments about the man's friends. To settle the case, the man received \$3,000; the apartment owner removed the resident manager from the position.

**National Origin / Religion:** A co-worker of a Muslim man employed by an auto repair company called him names and threatened him with a hammer. The man reported the situation to the owner, who did nothing and eliminated his shift. In settlement, the man received \$6,000.

**Sex:** After a fast food employee told her manager she was pregnant, he began referring to her as "the knocked-up one," and accused her of trying to get on state welfare. A settlement awarded the employee \$3,200; the manager agreed to attend fair employment and anti-harassment training.

**Sexual Orientation:** A local hospital refused to allow a male patient's same-sex partner to be listed as an emergency contact in order to perform a medical procedure. In settlement, the hospital agreed to conduct staff training on Washington State law and alternative patient registration options for diverse families.

**Disability:** A housing provider turned off the front door intercom of its apartment building during the day to reduce criminal activity. The action severely impacted a resident on dialysis, who struggled to come down to the lobby to let in his caregivers. The Seattle Hearing Examiner upheld SOCR's reasonable cause finding, awarded the man \$5,000 and ordered the housing provider not to turn off the intercom.



Corliss Harmer, Amanda Lopez-Miller and her daughter Sophia stand together after settling their fair housing case.

## And sometimes, a better understanding.

Amanda Lopez-Miller thought she'd found the perfect rental house for her and her family. The renters in the other half of the duplex, however, weren't so enthusiastic – they expressed their concerns to owner / manager Corliss Harmer about having a family with small children as their close neighbor. Corliss had very little experience as a landlord at that time, and she called Amanda to suggest she find another place. Amanda immediately called the Seattle Office for Civil Rights to report possible discrimination based on family status.

"I'd heard of situations like this, and even though I had other options at the time, I wanted to stand up for people who don't have a voice," said Amanda. "I just wanted to make sure everyone was holding up their end of the bargain."

Corliss felt terrible as soon as she realized what she'd done. As a new landlord, she hadn't known about fair housing laws, and she asked to settle the case as soon as possible. When the two women met to finalize the settlement in October 2008, they appreciated the chance to talk face to face about what had happened. As part of the signed agreement, Corliss made a donation to a local non-profit organization that helps women and children.

"The process was well-facilitated and informative," said Corliss. "It helped me to understand why the incident had been so distressing to Amanda. No one ever wants this to happen to them, but it was a valuable experience. I've shared it with everyone I know."

Amanda agrees. "My goal was to make something positive come out of what was a negative experience. People need the rental process to be fair."

## Other actions

### Seattle's new fair housing poster rule takes effect

Seattle City Council passed a law in late 2006 requiring all residential property managers and real estate professionals within Seattle City limits to "prominently display" a letter-sized fair housing poster in their place of business. After the law took effect in January 2007, SOCR mailed printed posters free of charge to property managers on request; the poster also is available online.

*On the web:*

*Fair Housing poster for property managers*

### SOCR revises enforcement rules

After incorporating public comments, SOCR introduced revised rule changes for our enforcement process in 2008. The rules describe the procedures used by SOCR to investigate charges of illegal discrimination. The most significant change was an increase in the minimum amount that a charging party can receive in compensation for being a victim of discrimination. The new amount of \$750 reflects the value of the old minimum (\$250) in 2008 dollars. Many other rule changes were designed to make SOCR's procedures easier to understand or consistent with recent amendments to the Seattle Municipal Code.

*On the web: Practice and procedure in discrimination cases Chapter 40*



SOCR staff join thousands of Seattle residents in the annual Martin Luther King Jr. March.

## Annual Case Statistics

	2006	2007	2008
<b>Cases filed</b>	204	219	180
<b>Cases closed</b>	171	258	205

### Cases filed by protected class

	2006	2007	2008
Race	92	85	60
Disability	55	81	56
National Origin	21	22	29
Retaliation	22	20	21
Sex	20	25	23
Family Status	3	7	16
Section 8	8	5	9
Age	9	13	8
Sexual Orientation	11	14	3
Religion	3	8	4

**Note:** This chart includes the protected classes involved most frequently in charges. It does not reflect the total number of charges; in addition, individual cases may involve more than one charge.

### Cases closed by type of case

	2006	2007	2008
Employment	74	117	84
Housing	73	93	101
Public accommodations	28	44	34

### Dollar amount received by charging parties through SOCR's settlement negotiations

2006	2007	2008
\$55,924	\$111,102	\$83,879

*On the web: Annual statistical summaries, 2006 / 2007 / 2008*



# Working to Achieve Justice

## City of Seattle Race and Social Justice Initiative

The Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) envisions a city where racial disparities have been eliminated and racial equity achieved.

RSJI is a citywide effort to end institutionalized racism and race-based disparities in City government.

There was no roadmap for this work; no American city or other government institution had ever undertaken an initiative that focuses explicitly on institutional racism.

As part of the City's commitment to RSJI, City departments develop and implement annual RSJI work plans. City employees also attend RSJI training to learn more about the Initiative and how to apply racial equity tools to City business.

The RSJ Initiative has resulted in significant policy and program changes within the City of Seattle, including:

**Racial Equity Toolkit:** To build awareness and ensure equitable policies, City departments use this new tool to analyze the race and social justice implications of budget, program and policy proposals.

In 2008, the Mayor's Office released a report that assessed

the Initiative's accomplishments and challenges so far, as well as looked ahead to the Initiative's next phase. In 2009, RSJI will continue to address racial disparities internally within City government, as well as externally, in partnership with community members and stakeholders.

**Translation and interpretation policy:** To ensure broader access to City services, City departments now provide translation and interpretation services for non-English speaking customers.

**Outreach and public engagement policy:** To improve civic participation, departments are working together on new inclusive outreach and public engagement strategies.

**Contracting Equity:** To provide more contracting opportunities for communities of color, the City has improved its process, increasing opportunities for minority businesses to compete and doubling the percentage of contracting for non-construction goods and services with women and minority-owned businesses.

To read "*Race and Social Justice Initiative Report 2008: Looking Back, Moving Forward*" or the "*RSJI Overview*," please visit [www.seattle.gov/rsji](http://www.seattle.gov/rsji).



Julie Nelson and RSJI manager Glenn Harris lead a training workshop.

### Why focus on institutional racism?

When it comes to race, Seattle is no different than any other city in the United States. Race influences where we live, where we work, how well we do in school, how long we will live, and the likelihood of our involvement in the criminal justice system. To eliminate these inequities we must focus on the root of the problem: institutional racism.

Institutional racism is when organizational programs or policies work to the benefit of white people and to the detriment of people of color, usually unintentionally or inadvertently.

To challenge institutional racism, we have to look beyond individual acts of prejudice to the systemic biases that are built into our institutions. None of us are to blame for what happened in the past, but we all are responsible for eliminating racism and its legacy today.



Dr. Raymond Winbush speaks to City employees as part of the RSJI Speaker Series.

# Working to Achieve Justice

## Policy and Outreach

The nation's civil rights laws offer critical protection to individuals who have been discriminated against; but they offer little help to people whose situations are not specifically covered by the law or who experience subtler, more systemic forms of bias.

SOCR tackles the larger issues of social justice that underlie individual cases of bias and discrimination. We conduct wide-ranging outreach across the city to ensure that people who live and work in Seattle are familiar with civil rights laws and know about our services.



SOCR's Brenda Anibarro and Marta Idowu staff an information table at the annual Juneteenth Celebration.



SOCR investigators Merle Weiss, Karina Bull and Karina's daughter Odessa staff an information table at the 2008 Pride Festival.

### Changes to state law

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights has helped shape the course of progressive statewide legislation. SOCR provided testimony and key background information on same sex partners' rights, voting rights restoration, state definition of disability and "source of income" discrimination. In 2009, Washington State granted extensive rights for same sex partners and made it much easier for former felons to restore their voting rights. The state also added civil rights protection based on "veteran and military status," as well as increased housing protections for survivors of domestic violence.

### Improving access for people with disabilities

In addition to investigating dozens of cases each year alleging discrimination based on disability, SOCR also provides extensive training, technical assistance and outreach to businesses, organizations and the general public on disability access, service animals and other issues. We worked to ensure disability access rights were addressed in legislation to encourage sidewalk cafes. We also worked closely with City departments such as Transportation, Animal Control, the Seattle Public

Library, Parks and Recreation and Seattle Police to develop solutions to complex issues involving public access for people with disabilities.

### Criminal background discrimination

Many people face widespread discrimination based on their criminal background. It is common for former felons to be turned away from housing and jobs solely because they once committed a crime. SOCR has created and distributed "Employment and Housing Facts for People with Criminal Records." The brochure clarifies landlords' and employers' power to base hiring and housing decisions on a person's record.

### Religious rights at work and home

Responding to frequent questions from the public on religious rights, SOCR developed a brochure to address "Religious Accommodations in Employment and Housing."





# Commissions

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights staffs three independent commissions that advise the Mayor, City Council and City departments:

## Seattle Human Rights Commission

The Seattle Human Rights Commission (SHRC) educates the public and advocates for human and civil rights.

- In 2007, SHRC held a series of public forums to examine the state of human rights in the City of Seattle.
- The Commission worked with SOCR to revise the appeals procedure for charging parties whose civil rights cases are found to be no-cause.
- In 2008, SHRC worked with the Seattle City Council to add homelessness as a protected class to Seattle's malicious harassment ordinance. SHRC also distributed wallet cards describing the new law to homeless service providers throughout Seattle.

*On the web:*

*Malicious harassment wallet cards*



## Seattle Women's Commission

The Seattle Women's Commission (SWC) recommends policies, legislation and programs concerning women.

- SWC issued a report outlining issues and recommendations that emerged from the Seattle Women's Summit in Fall 2005.
- SWC coordinated the 2007 Seattle Women's Summit, where more than 150 participants shared resources and identified issues of importance to the women of Seattle.

*On the web: Seattle Women's Summit reports: 2005 / 2007*

- Commissioners researched background data regarding the stress level of elder caregivers, and developed strategies to improve the city and state childcare voucher program.



## Seattle Commission for Sexual Minorities

The Seattle Commission for Sexual Minorities (SCSM) addresses the concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) residents of Seattle.

- After hosting a Queer Youth Forum in 2005, SCSM produced a report for the City on "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth in Seattle: Report and Policy Recommendations."

*On the web: LGBTQ Youth Report*

- As part of the Diversities in Health Disparities Project, SCSM produced a comprehensive report in 2008 on "Health Disparities: The Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community in Seattle"

*On the web:*

*Health Disparities report*

- Responding to a growing number of anti-gay hate crimes, SCSM helped organize a Safety Fair in 2008 for the community and distributed hate crime wallet cards to the LGBT community.



**Clockwise from bottom left:**  
2007 public meeting on police professional accountability, sponsored by the Seattle Human Rights Commission; 2007 Seattle Women's Summit, coordinated by the Seattle Women's Commission; public forum sponsored by the Seattle Commission for Sexual Minorities.

# Seattle Human Rights Day

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights, the Seattle Human Rights Commission, the United Nations Association of Seattle and other groups host an annual event to commemorate the signing of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Human Rights Day offers Seattle residents the chance to hear from nationally renowned guest speakers. In addition, the annual Human Rights Day Awards recognize local individuals and community groups for their outstanding work in furthering human rights.



**Guest Speakers**  
2006 Maria Hinojosa



2007 Kenji Yoshino



2008 Dr. Robert Bullard

## Award Honorees

Magdaleno Rose-Avila  
Trans Jail Policy Group

Paulina Lopez  
Casa Latina  
Save Darfur  
Washington State

NW Immigrant  
Rights Project  
Somali Community  
Services of Seattle  
YWCA GirlsFirst  
Michael Neguse  
The Tronie Foundation



Members of Somali Community Service of Seattle receive a Human Rights Day award in 2008 from Human Rights Commission chair Lubna Mahadeen, City Council President Richard Conlin and SOCR director Julie Nelson.



In the City of Seattle it is illegal to discriminate based on:

- Age
- Sex
- Race
- Color
- Creed
- Religion
- Ancestry
- Disability
- Marital status
- Parental status
- National origin
- Gender identity
- Political ideology
- Sexual orientation
- Use of a service animal
- Military status or veteran
- Use of a Section 8 certificate

The law also protects you from harassment and retaliation.

You can find this report and all materials mentioned on our web site.  
Visit us at [www.seattle.gov/civilrights](http://www.seattle.gov/civilrights)  
Information will be made available on request to accommodate  
people with disabilities and those who need language translation.

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